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## ON THE PHILOSOPHY OF LAUGHING.

**L**AUGHING is the privilege of man, and we should expect that it has a profound and philosophical background. Not only that we laugh at all, but as a rule also what we laugh about is a matter of great significance. But although laughing is one of the peculiar characteristics of man, we cannot say that the more a man laughs the more human he is. It is a prerogative, yet its use is limited, and it serves man as a relaxation only in the gravity of life; it is a kind of compensation for the seriousness of his duties.

Laughter is like the rainbow which originates through a sort of contrast of sunshine with rain. The dark background is needed, otherwise laughter would lack color. Take away the merry form in which fun is dressed, and you will find a very serious idea at the bottom of the object of all mirth. The higher the waves of humor rise, the deeper usually and the profounder is the earnestness of their hidden meaning. *Don Quixote* is exceedingly enjoyable, but it is also a satire and a very drastic one. Its melancholy moral is the condemnation of a misguided idealist; its inmost truth is a sad lesson. The comedies of Aristophanes, such as *The Birds* and *The Clouds*, are droll and frolicsome, but how terrible is the subject of every one of them! *The Clouds* depict the philosopher Socrates, whose eventual martyrdom is known; and *The Birds* are a humorous criticism of the Sicilian expedition undertaken with confidence and extravagant hopes but ending in the wreck of the whole Athenian navy and army, so that literally not one man escaped to tell the tale.

Comedy and Tragedy are akin. Both combat the insufficiency of the world and show us the way to conquer it. Tragedy exhibits

the struggle for ideals, to be fought with the bad, the unmoral, and the dark principles of the world, which by comedy are humorously castigated in their more trivial manifestations.

The world in its fundamental constitution is a unity which finds expression in the harmony of the laws of nature. The eternal divinity of the world is one with itself. But the actual details of reality present a constant restlessness. Life is a struggle in which the equilibrium of absolute satisfaction is necessarily unattainable. The unison of organised life is constantly jeopardised by all sorts of evil, which apparently justify both a dualistic philosophy and its correlate, a pessimistic view of existence. Yet through danger and death the unity of the whole can be restored; the problems of our doubt find eventually their solution, and the idea of monism will prove victorious in the end. In spite of all wickedness and mischief we cling to the standard of ideal aspirations, and our misfortune serves but to give our will a deeper root in the eternal order of things by transfiguring our being with the divine purpose of the whole. Thus pessimism will naturally lead to meliorism.

Life is serious, and if we could see all the misery of life at once it would so oppress us that we would long to die. But because life is serious, and because we need a buoyant spirit to fight the struggle of life bravely, we need as a temporary relief from time to time a hearty laugh. The man who always laughs lacks seriousness, he is silly. Constant laughing betrays a fool. But a man who cannot laugh had better consult his physician. He is sick. He is devoid of that elasticity of spirit which is so necessary for carrying the burden of life with ease and in good grace. He will not live long and had better attend to his last will. Laughter is a medicine that will heal sour dispositions and a bad temper or alleviate the loss of fortune and the buffets of ill luck.

It is a royal gift to be able to tell the truth with jokes and teach a lesson under laughter, as Horace says, “*ridentem dicere verum.*” Wilhelm Busch, the famous author of *Max und Moritz* has succeeded in giving to the world an exposition<sup>1</sup> of his philoso-

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<sup>1</sup> *Eduards Traum.* By Wilhelm Busch. 1891. München: F. Bassermann.

phy in the report of a dream which is partly satirical, partly humorous, and full of the most ridiculous incidents.

The import of laughing as a wholesome factor in life can scarcely be underrated and has been freely recognised by some of the most serious thinkers of mankind. But the question rises, Why does man laugh? What is the comical, the ridiculous, i. e., the laughter-eliciting object, that something at which we laugh? Is it a fact that exists in reality, or is man's laugh purely a product of his subjective conception? What, in fine, is the nature of the ridiculous in all its various forms? What is the physiology of laughter, what its *raison d'être*? What is the law through which it exists? What are the conditions of its origin? In brief, what is its significance in the economy of nature?

A thorough investigation of the philosophy of laughter would fill volumes, but we may be permitted to skim the subject and present to our readers a few thoughts touching on the salient points without promising an exhaustive treatment.

Laughter is an outburst of sentiment, which, however, is limited to the realm of rational mentality. By virtue of its spontaneous nature it has been classified among the reflex phenomena of the organism and so would possess a certain resemblance to sneezing and coughing. But granting that laughing is a reflex, we must bear in mind that it is a mental reflex; it is an immediate response to a stimulus. The comical does not tickle the diaphragm but the intellect. It is a physiological not a mental stimulus.

Aristotle, in speaking of comedy, explains the nature of the ridiculous (*τὸ γελοῖον*) in his *Ars poetica* as follows:

"The ridiculous is something that is faulty and ugly, if painless and not injurious.<sup>1</sup> Thus, for instance, a ridiculous farce is something deformed and distorted without pain."

Cicero, in his discourses on Oratory and Orators, is apparently under the influence of Aristotle. His terms "*turpitudo et deformitas*" are unquestionably a translation of *ἀμάρτημά τι καὶ αἰσχός*. Cicero introduces Cæsar's opinion on wit, which is said to be a gift of nature not subject to rules. Cæsar says:

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<sup>1</sup> *ἀμάρτημά τι καὶ αἰσχός ἀνάδινον καὶ οὐ φθαρτικόν.*

"I think that a man who is not destitute of polite learning can discourse upon any subject more wittily than upon wit itself. Accordingly, when I met with some Greek books entitled *On Jests*, I conceived some hope that I might learn something from them. I found, it is true, many laughable and witty sayings of the Greeks; for those of Sicily excel in that way, as well as the Rhodians and Byzantines, but, above all, the people of Attica. But they who have attempted to deliver rules and principles on that subject, have shown themselves so extremely foolish that nothing else in them has excited laughter but their folly. This talent, therefore, appears to me incapable of being communicated by teaching. As there are two kinds of wit, one running regularly through a whole speech, the other pointed and concise; the ancients denominated the former humor (*Cavillatio*), the latter jesting (*Quippe*). Each sort has but a light name, and justly; for it is altogether but a light thing to raise a laugh."

Cicero's further exposition of the subject, the main passages of which are again accredited to Cæsar, is apparently a diligent digest of the opinions of classic antiquity. We may be pardoned for quoting large extracts from this chapter because the views presented in it have influenced almost all later authors who have written on the subject, and not everybody has his Cicero handy. Julius Cæsar in reply to some questions and objections of Sulpicius, Crassus, and Antonius, says:

"Concerning laughter, there are five things which are subjects of consideration: one, 'What it is;' another, 'Whence it originates;' a third, 'Whether it becomes the orator to wish to excite laughter;' a fourth, 'To what degree;' a fifth, 'What are the several kinds of the ridiculous? As to the first, 'What laughter itself is,' by what means it is excited, where it lies, how it arises, and bursts forth so suddenly that we are unable, though we desire, to restrain it, and how it affects at once the sides, the face, the veins, the countenance, the eyes, let Democritus consider; for all this has nothing to do with my remarks, and if it had to do with them, I should not be ashamed to say that I am ignorant of that which not even they understand who profess to explain it. But the seat and, as it were, province of what is laughed at (for that is the next point of inquiry), lies in a certain offensiveness and deformity; for those sayings are laughed at solely or chiefly which point out and designate something offensive in an inoffensive manner. But, to come to the third point, it certainly becomes the orator to excite laughter; either because mirth itself attracts favor to him by whom it is raised; or because all admire wit, which is often comprised in a single word, especially in him who replies and sometimes in him who attacks; or because it overthrows the adversary, or hampers him, or makes light of him, or discourages, or refutes him; or because it proves the orator himself to be a man of taste, or learning, or polish; but chiefly

because it mitigates and relaxes gravity and severity, and often, by a joke or a laugh, breaks the force of offensive remarks, which cannot easily be overthrown by arguments. But to what degree the laughable should be carried by the orator requires very diligent consideration."

"The first point to be observed is, that we should not fancy ourselves obliged to utter a jest whenever one may be uttered. A very little witness was produced. 'May I question him?' says Philippus. The judge who presided, being in a hurry, replied, 'Yes, if he is short.' 'You shall have no fault to find,' said Philippus, 'for I shall question him very short.' This was ridiculous enough; but Lucius Aurifex was sitting as judge in the case, who was shorter than the witness himself; so that all the laughter was turned upon the judge, and hence the joke appeared scurrilous. Those good things, therefore, which hit those whom you do not mean to hit, however witty they are, are yet in their nature scurrilous; as when Appius, who would be thought witty—and indeed is so, but sometimes slides into this fault of scurrility—said to Caius Sextius, an acquaintance of mine, who is blind of an eye, 'I will sup with you to-night, for I see that there is a vacancy for one.' This was a scurrilous joke, both because he attacked Sextius without provocation, and said what was equally applicable to all one-eyed persons. Such jokes, as they are thought premeditated, excite less laughter; but the reply of Sextius was excellent and extempore: 'Wash your hands,' said he, 'and come to supper.'"

"Nasica, having called at the house of the poet Ennius, and the maid-servant having told him, on his inquiring at the door, that Ennius was not at home, saw that she had said so by her master's order, and that he was really within; and when, a few days afterward, Ennius called at Nasica's house, and inquired for him at the gate, Nasica cried out that he was not at home. 'What,' says Ennius, 'do I not know your voice?' 'You are an impudent fellow,' rejoined Nasica; 'when I inquired for you, I believed your servant when she told me that you were not at home, and will not you believe me when I tell you that I am not at home?'"

Horace in his *Ars poetica* gives us a practical illustration of his theory of the ridiculous; he says:

"Humano capiti cervicem pictor equinam  
Jungere si velit, et varias inducere plumas.  
Undique collatis membris, ut turpiter atrum  
Descinat in pisces mulier formosa superne,  
Spectatum admissi risum teneatis, amici?

Which means: If a painter should place a human head on a horse's neck, adorn it with feathers and attach to it limbs of all kinds, making it above a beautiful woman and below a fish: would you not laugh if you saw it?

Doubtless we should laugh if we saw things joined together that did not agree; but we should probably not laugh so much at the picture as at the artist who had such odd ideas and painted them where they were out of place. No one laughs at a griffin on a coat of arms or at a sphinx in a masonic temple. At mermaids in fairy tales who are beautiful women above but have ugly fish-tails below, we do not laugh; for there we naturally expect to meet with grotesque forms. The first picture of Boecklin will strike us as extremely funny, but as soon as we know that such is the artist's style, that he paints nothing but Nereids, centaurs, and other fabulous creatures, his mannerism will no longer be regarded as comical.

Modern explanations of the nature of the ridiculous do not greatly depart from the Aristotelean idea. Kant's theory of the ridiculous is interesting but unsatisfactory. "The cause of laughter," he says, "is the sudden transformation of a tense expectation into nothing." Kant's best example is the story of a Hindu who, seated at the table of an English gentleman in Surat, saw a bottle of ale opened from which the froth came out profusely and violently; he expressed his surprise at the unwonted sight and said in explanation of his astonishment: "I do not wonder at its coming out, but how any one could have put so great a mass of foam into so small a bottle, I cannot understand." It is natural that we laugh at the Hindu, but we do not laugh, as Kant says, because our expectation which has been held in a state of tension, when relaxed, suddenly disappears into nothing; we simply laugh at the ignorance of the man who seeks the difficulty in a wrong place.

Another of Kant's stories is this. A circle of his friends were displeased at some one who was boring them with a long and improbable tale, designed to prove that through grief the hair of a person could turn gray in a single night, when a waggish rogue began to set forth the details of the grief of a merchant who on his return home from India encountered a heavy storm and was obliged to throw all his possessions overboard, adding that he was so much grieved at his loss that in the same night his wig turned gray. We are sure that every one present laughed, but did they laugh because their expectation ended with a sudden disappoint-

ment, and the argument vanished into nothing? Not at all. They laughed at the disappointment of the first speaker who was convinced of meeting an ally when actually he was duped by an adversary in ambush.

Jean Paul Richter treats the ridiculous with much grace in his *Vorschule der Aesthetik*; he calls humor the inversion of the sublime and tries to explain the former from the latter. The sublime is a perfect teleological adaptation; the comical, however, is its contrary, it is *Zweckwidrigkeit*. His theory is scarcely tenable, and we enjoy more his examples than his argument. Solger, following Kant and Richter, contrasts the comical with the sublime, and Sulzer defines the ridiculous as an absurdity (*Ungereimtheit*) or a deformity (*Missverhältniss*), which appears to be a mere repetition of the Aristotelian theory.

Floegel has done much valuable work on the subject but has not advanced an original theory.

Vischer treats the comical in its connexion with the beautiful. He defines the beautiful as the sense-appearance of the idea, *das sinnliche Scheinen der Idee*. All pure types, as ideas realised in their perfection, are beautiful, but such types, as the monkey, representing transitions, or the porcupine, being an animal which reminds one of the thorns in the world of plants, are ugly; they are impure types; they are not realisations of a pure idea but contain contradictory elements. Thus the comical is, according to Vischer, not only lower than the sublime, but it is also (and here Vischer is mistaken) morally indifferent. He says:<sup>1</sup>

"Tragical irony differs specifically from the typically comical, and we can use the former as a transition to the latter. For out of the negation of the former proceeds a new affirmation; and above the downfall of human sublimity rises the higher sublimity of the cosmic soul,—the *Weltgeist*. The comical, however, in its disappearance into nothing does not propose to affirm some higher sublimity; for the comical has no intention whatever, because it does not lead to any positive result. Hence it is not possible that in a tragedy the comical characters can have anything to say at the conclusion of the drama."

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<sup>1</sup> *Ueber das Erhabene und Komische, ein Beitrag zur Philosophie des Schönen*, p. 156.

We need not refute Vischer's proposition, for it is obviously wrong. Vischer defines the comical as the sublime made plainly perceptible,—*ein deutlich gemachtes Erhabenes*,—for, he adds, the plain appearance of all sensual details annihilates the semblance of infinitude (*Schein des Unendlichen*).

Mr. St. Schütze of Weimar has devoted a book of 274 pages to an explanation of the comical. He insists on its reality in the world. The comical, he says, is not merely a subjective product of the comical poet. "Its existence is as actual as the existence of the tragical; and man cannot escape either." (Page 20.) Schütze regards the funny as a result of man's limitations. Man believes himself to be free but finds by experience that he is a plaything of nature. The comical reminds man of his dependence upon physical conditions and points out by a humorous derision his relation to a higher state of freedom. The materiality of the world is the objective cause of the ridiculous, for materiality and spirituality form a contrast which manifests itself as an incomplete realisation of the ideal. Wit discovers similarities and subsumes discrepant things under the same category. (Page 144.) Satirical is that which castigates vices. (Page 236.) A joke is different from witty remarks in so far as it rests upon a figment; it either distorts the truth or is a pure invention. (Page 150.) A jolly temper finds expression in general merriment which in humor rises to a moral and intellectual height, for humor indicates a self-possession and joyful independence which is difficult to attain. (Page 161.)

Almost all modern aestheticians agree that the ridiculous is something awry or out of place, an incongruity of some kind due to a comparison of heterogeneous things.

Schopenhauer does not consider it worth while to refute the theories of Jean Paul Richter and others, but, as I understand him, his own explanation is not essentially different. He asserts that "Laughing arises from a suddenly conceived incongruity between some real object and its idea, and that it is nothing but the expression of this incongruity." And in another place he states the same theory in other words: "The origin of the ridiculous is

the paradoxical and therefore unexpected subsumption of an object under an entirely heterogeneous idea."

An example of Schopenhauer's is as follows: "A king of France travelling through Gascony laughs at a man of that province who in severe winter was lightly dressed, and asking him if he did not feel chilly, the poor fellow answered: "If your Majesty were dressed like me, you would feel intolerably warm." "Well," the king asked, "and what are you dressed in?" "In my whole wardrobe," was the reply. We do not laugh, as Schopenhauer thinks, at the incongruity of a king's wardrobe and that of the poor wretch, but simply at the king's being rebuked, which is done in a harmless way, without hurting his feelings, so amiably and gracefully that even the king could not help laughing, and openly acknowledging the peasant's petty triumph.

Schopenhauer tells another anecdote to illustrate his theory: "Some one says he likes to take his walks alone. 'So do I,' another person answers, 'let us walk together.'" Schopenhauer's explanation about incongruity does not hit the point; we laugh simply at the undaunted impudence of the intruder and perhaps also of the chagrin of him who tries in vain to escape. Suppose the lonely walker is just bent on avoiding for some reason or another the man who confronts him, and the latter, glad to meet him, is bound to speak to him, willy-nilly. The former will probably not laugh, while our mirth solely depends upon our sympathies with either party! We will laugh if we wish the intruder success.

Here is another instance: Soldiers on duty in a guard house have some one arrested and allow him to join in their game of cards. However, as he cheats, they kick him out, entirely forgetting that he is a prisoner. Do we laugh at the incongruity of the treatment of arrested people and at the general doctrine that rascallions must be kicked out? No, we simply laugh at the stupidity of the soldiers who, in their zeal to punish a rascal, allow their prisoner to escape.

Schopenhauer's position is in one respect peculiar. While other aestheticians declare that we laugh at the deformity, ugliness, or insufficiency of the reality as it is in comparison with what it

ought to be, he contends that we laugh because the idea does not cover reality. We enjoy, he says, the victory of intuitive cognition in worsting abstract thought. This is a remark not of Schopenhauer the idealist, but of Schopenhauer the pessimist. The idealist ought to hail the superiority of the idea ; but here Schopenhauer sneers at the imperfection of man's highest and best.

Schopenhauer's theory is highly improbable. Is there any one who laughs at the insufficiency of abstract thought? Abstract thought has in most cases nothing whatever to do with laughing. In fact, the baby that is incapable of abstract thinking, laughs as heartily as grown up people.

The best explanation of laughing appears to have been offered by Dr. Karl Gustav Carus of Dresden, who regards laughing as the expression of life intensified, and weeping with its groans and moans as a depression of the vitality of the organism. In his opinion the reiteration of the laugh is due to an increase of breathing, while the sighs of the afflicted indicate a retardation of the life-process.

Darwin in his very instructive essay on laughter<sup>1</sup> explains it to be "primarily the expression of mere joy or happiness," and expatiates on its physical mechanism, on the construction of the zygomatic and other muscles, etc. He anatomises the physiology of laughing, adding : "but why the sounds which man utters when he is pleased have the peculiar reiterated character of laughter we do not know."

On the subject of tickling and the physiology of laughing, Darwin ingeniously remarks, "The imagination is sometimes said to be tickled by a ludicrous idea ; and this so-called tickling of the mind is curiously analogous with that of the body [*loc. cit.*, page 201]. . . . It seems that the precise point [in tickling] to be touched must not be known. So with the mind, something unexpected—a novel or incongruous idea which breaks through an habitual train of thought—appears to be a strong element in the ludicrous." Yet in spite of this similarity of laughing to reflex motions, he maintains

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<sup>1</sup> Chap. 8 in *The Expr. of the Emot.* etc.

that there are different causes which call forth the simple childish laughter and that of adult persons, and he adds, laughter from a ludicrous idea, though involuntary, cannot be called strictly a reflex action [page 201] in man and animals.

Also Mr. Herbert Spencer has ventured an explanation of laughing in his *Physiology of Laughter*,<sup>1</sup> where he remarks, "A large amount of nervous energy instead of being allowed to expend itself in producing an equivalent amount of the new thoughts and emotion which were nascent, is suddenly checked in its flow. . . . The excess must discharge itself in some other direction and there results an efflux through the motor nerves to various classes of the muscles producing the half-convulsive actions we term laughter."

Laughing is perhaps a simpler process than we think, and our philosophers in seeking an explanation go too far. Kant ought to have found it, when he discovered the key to the universe in the *a priori* which is rooted in our subjective disposition. Why did he not think of his idealism when inquiring into the nature of the ridiculous? All aestheticians from Aristotle down to the present time have attempted to explain the ridiculous from the object which elicits ridicule and excites merriment. It behooved a Kant to turn the tables, as he did in other respects and as it was the tendency of his philosophy. Since he himself forgot his own theory let us try to explain the ridiculous not objectively from the thing laughed at, but subjectively from our laughing. Let us, accordingly, not ask, what we laugh at, but why we laugh; and what we mean to express by our laughing.

Schopenhauer says that the mental instigation of laughter must be explained from a function of our brain, which when suddenly grasping the incongruence of an intuitively perceived object with an abstract idea, simultaneously affects the medulla oblongata or some other organ from which this queer reflex motion proceeds, shaking at the same time so many different parts of the body.

This is an explanation based on a vague hypothesis and attempts to prove what is not true, viz., that laughing starts from the

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<sup>1</sup> Essays, 2nd Series, 1863, p. 114.

seat of abstract thought, while actually it is the expression of a sentiment which like other sentiments affects the lungs and the heart. Laughter is the expression of an exhilaration and should be contrasted, not so much with weeping, as with moaning. Weeping is only one form of moaning. Both laughing and moaning are "affectionates" that interfere with breathing. Laughing consists in quickly repeated ejaculations of a triumphal shouting, while moaning is a suppressed but continued sigh, the expression of pain. Moaning, as Karl Gustav Carus rightly remarks, affects the lungs by retarding our breathing while laughing accelerates breathing and thus preoccupies our lungs, not leaving them sufficient time to perform their function properly. It is indirectly through the disturbance of the function of the lungs that laughter shakes the diaphragm.

Laughing is not a matter of intellect but of character. It depends more on our disposition than our thoughts; and as we sometimes betray our feelings in spite of ourselves, so our laugh may frequently carry us away despite our trying to master and suppress it.

But what is the significance of the reiterated shouting which we experience in laughter? The answer seems simple enough. Can it be anything else than a shout of triumph, the loud announcement of a victory, and an expression of joy at a success of some kind?

Imagine we ejaculate a single laugh for some reason or other, say because we have succeeded in something by a sudden stroke, be it by words or by a deed outwitting an enemy of ours. "Ha!" we exclaim, raising our voice to an unusual pitch. The aspiration of our voice is so much stronger than in the common pronunciation of *Ha* as to set the full compass of our lungs in motion down to the diaphragm, which being connected with the lungs is thus mechanically raised. If this *Ha!* be repeated several times, it forms a volley of ejaculations by which the whole breast begins to shake; and such a phenomenon is a regular laughter, which is nothing but the abbreviation of a triumphal shout. Translated into common parlance it means: "Hurrah, I have got the best of you and you are worsted."

We laugh only at petty triumph. We never laugh when gain-

ing a great victory, as on a battle-field ; in such a case we set up a regular shout of triumph. But suppose it be a trivial affair of common everyday life, it is but natural that the expression thereof should be diminished to a miniature shouting.

If the cause of laughter were, as our philosophers say, a painless faultiness or incongruity, why do we neglect to hail with laughter the innumerable harmless discrepancies in the world? If a transformation of intense expectation into nothing were in itself comical, why are not the losses of fortune, or if that be too painful, at least the losses in a game of cards, funny? If laughing were a discharge of checked energy in another direction, as Mr. Spencer has it, we ought to say that a boiler laughs when its steam is let off. We think it very improper to laugh at institutions or persons which we do not like to expose to a harmless defeat ; but if the traditional explications were admissible, there would be no cause whatever for being offended at any laughter, nor could we explain its being prohibited in serious and sacred matters. The reason is that laughter expresses an exultation which must appear improper whenever we are in the presence of what is sublime and holy.

Our explanation of laughing, then, certainly agrees with the popular idea, according to which the word is used to express any kind of triumph. The proverb says : "He who laughs last laughs best ;" which does not mean, he laughs best who gives vent in reflex motions to the last impression of an incongruity between reality and an idea, or experiences a contrast, or detects some painless deformity ; but it states simply the fact, that he enjoys the best triumph who is victorious in the end. To laugh means to triumph.

We may distinguish different kinds of laughter according to the sound. The laughter in *e*, "Hee-hee!", is the hiss and sneer of a trickishly gained victory ; the laughter in *ey*, "Hey-hey!", expresses contempt at a worsted wretch who is now at our mercy ; the laugh in *oh*, "Hohoh!" is a scoff of self-exaltation, as if to say, Is it possible that you could be so stupid ; in *oo* it marks disgust. The object of our laughter is pooh-poohed by a "Hoo, hoo, hoo!" which sounds like a protest that we won't have anything to do with the matter in question. The clearest and purest vowel, which is *ah*,

is characteristic of the gallant victor, who does not intend to sneer or to scoff at his adversary, but simply enjoys a pure-hearted triumph. All kinds of laughter, however, equally participate in the initial consonant *h*; which denotes spirited pride and mirth, symbolising the exulting breath of a swelling bosom and being in reality the attestation of a self-possessed mind, a victor and conqueror.

Let us now see whether this explanation of laughing can serve as a theory that will account for the ridiculous in its various forms. We trust it will. We do not laugh merely at witticisms, puns, and jokes. If two persons are running a race, he who outruns the other will laugh at his defeated rival. Why? Because a laugh is the expression of a trivial triumph. When a child plays hide and seek with its nurse, the child laughs as soon as it finds her; and who would in that case think that the child laughs because he sees anything incongruous, or hears any witty remarks that express a contrast, or because he discovers the combination of heterogeneous objects, or meets with a faulty and ugly thing. The child simply laughs to express his feeling of triumph. A child will laugh at anything, if he is in good spirits, just as a dog will bark and a horse neigh when in good health on their start for an outing. It is an expression of the joy of life and a consciousness of vigor which is capable of coping with any anticipated difficulty. A placard in a show contained the announcement that a rose-colored horse was to be seen within. People entered at the front and were dismissed through a rear door. The man who showed this wonder of nature led the public to a white horse garlanded with wreaths of white roses. He outwitted the public who forgot that there were roses of different colors. When we laugh at the fraud, we applaud the success of the trickster.

Yet we must bear in mind that a petty victory which we hail with shouting is always sudden. There must be one moment in which all our exultant joy appears concentrated. Victorious soldiers will shout the louder, the more significant the moment is, and they are the more clamorous in the announcement of their victory, the more unexpected it is. It is exactly the same with laughter. Shakespeare rightly remarks, "Brevity is the soul of wit,"

for indeed, the finale of a joke especially, its aim, must as much as possible be concealed ; it must come as a surprise, as a sort of ambush, the appearance of which is at once recognised as decisive. If the enemy is eventually surrounded and gradually cut off from all hope, as was Napoleon III. at Sedan, wherever there is not one decisive blow, but a piecemeal victory, there is as little occasion for a triumphal shout as there is in an analogous case of word-battles for laughter. If in a taunt or in any witticism the point has been betrayed too soon, or if it be philosophically explained and analysed before it is fully told, there will be no response to the best joke.

Laughter is the expression of a sentiment, and in this sense its origin is of a purely subjective nature ; but for that reason it is not void of objective significance. The objective conditions that elicit a laugh are any such situation which bodes either the victory or defeat of some one—perhaps of ourselves. An absurdity, or an incongruity, or the contrast of the real and ideal are never in themselves ridiculous ; they become ridiculous only if they are somehow instrumental in defeating somebody, in worsting an adversary, or in conquering his cause. Nothing is in itself ridiculous, but anything will become so as soon as it serves to secure a harmless triumph.

Jonathan Swift is perhaps the most witty author in English literature. But the humor of his satires could not always be explained on the current theories. There lived in Swift's time an erratic man whose name was John Partridge, an astrologer, who in his annual almanacs never failed to make all kinds of bold predictions. Swift proposed to trip him and began in his turn also to publish prophecies in which he boldly declared that Mr. Partridge would die on a certain day in the next following March. When the appointed day came, Mr. Swift solemnly announced the death of Mr. Partridge and asserted that it had taken place in accordance with the prophecy. The poor almanac-maker protested that he was still alive ; but his assertion was met by his witty adversary with a solemn assurance that Mr. Partridge was mistaken, that he was actually dead, or at least ought to be dead. There is no incongruity in the joke. It is merely an act of pillorying a hopeless

ignoramus. Is it possible that we laugh at the incongruity of the dead and yet living astrologer? Or is there any conflict between the ideal and the real? Kant's explanation of a tense expectation which is resolved into nothing will scarcely suffice. Neither is there any amount of energy checked and suddenly discharged in our laughter, as Mr. Spencer would make us believe. There is simply a man over-trumped, not by subtle argument, but by blunt mockery. The more serious Mr. Partridge was in his replies, the more humorous the situation grew.

A dilemma is in itself by no means ridiculous, but if used for worsting an adversary it may become funny according to conditions. We may mention, e. g., that famous juridical instance in which a law student at Athens promised to pay his teacher when he would win his first lawsuit. However, having finished his course, he did not accept a case until his professor sued him. The professor now felt sure of obtaining his fee, for his pupil would have to pay in either case: if he lost his suit, the court would sentence him to pay, and if he won it, the student had won his first law suit. But the young man declared that, on the contrary, he need not pay at all; for either he won the case, in which event the court had decided in his favor; or he lost the case, and in that event he was under no obligation to pay on account of not having won his first law suit. This dilemma and counter-dilemma is not in itself laughable, but it contains conditions which may be utilised for a joke. Every joke must have a point; it must be directed against some-one or something; otherwise there is nothing at which we may laugh. Thus the dilemma becomes comical in discussions where it is a good and effective weapon.

Christ made frequent use of dilemmas in his controversies with the Scribes and the Pharisees. However, most people read the Bible too prayerfully to comprehend it, and fail to see the humor of Jesus when he defeats the learned dignitaries of the synagogue.

St. Luke says: "And it came to pass on one of the days as he was teaching the people in the temple, and preaching the Gospel, there came upon him the chief priests and the scribes with the elders; and they spoke saying unto him: 'By what authority doest

thou these things?" No doubt the priests intended to stop his preaching on the plea that he had no authority, and if Jesus had claimed to have authority from God, they would simply have said: "We do not believe it, and as long as you cannot convince us, you cannot be allowed to teach in the temple." But Christ saw the snare and turned the two horns of a dilemma against them. He said: "I also will ask you a question, tell me: The baptism of John, was it from heaven or from men?" And they reasoned with themselves, saying: If we shall say from heaven, he will say why did ye not believe him? But if we say from men, all the people will stone us, for they were persuaded that John was a prophet. And they answered that they did not know, whence it was. And Jesus said unto them: "Neither tell I you by what authority I do these things." When the Pharisees, unable to answer, confess that they do not know, they could no doubt see smiles on the faces of the disciples and Jesus, and perhaps they met with sneers from the multitude.

Socrates used to defeat his enemies by following them on their own ground and leading them astray, carefully hiding the ambush which he prepared for them. At last they see themselves ousted from their position and entangled in their own inconsistency. This is called irony or simulation.

Another kind of *reductio ad absurdum*, not so refined, to be sure, but more drastic, is the method of exaggeration. For instance, some one boasts, in company, of his feats in swimming. He says, "I swam once across the Bosphorus." His neighbor wants to show his incredulity and tries to outdo him. So he says: "That is nothing! I heard of some one who swam across the Channel." He might have triumphed had not the bold swimmer been ready to anticipate the blow by accepting the statement and adding pathetically: "Shake hands, dear sir, it was I who performed that deed!" In the domain of fun truth does not decide, and if the wit is applauded it is not because we believe his words but because we admire the quickness of his repartee.

Lies invented as a persiflage of the braggart, form quite a class of comical literature of their own. Such are the stories of Münchhausen, who saves his life when almost drowning in a marsh, by

pulling himself out by his own queue. Lies must be very good in order to be enjoyable. If there is no method in the madness of the story which would render it at least verbally possible, it will fall flat, and the imitator of Münchhausen will be hooted at. To castigate one who with poorly-invented stories had bored a circle of friends, some one began a tale of the Wild West. Having reported the exciting details of a fight with Indians, he describes how at last three men pursued him, but they were separated by considerable distances, which gave him a chance for escape. The first Indian overtook him, but he slew him ; then came the second Indian, and he slew him also. And now the third one approached. Here the story-teller goes into details making his hearer impatient for the final outcome until he is interrupted with the question : "And you slew him too ?" Then he replies gravely : "No, he slew me."

There is a way to catch unwary listeners by telling them long tales and at the height of their suspense reporting some impossibility, when he who believes becomes the general laughing stock. For instance a gentleman tells of some friend of his, an officer in the last war, who received a pension for the loss of one arm. When the pensioner learned that his pension would be doubled if he had lost both arms, he drew his sword and cut off his other arm. If a joke of this kind is involuntary it is called an Irish bull.

It is not necessary that the worsted party should be the dupe of somebody else ; he may be entrapped in his own snares or by awkward circumstances. This is called a comical situation. Examples are plenty, and any good comedy will afford instances of it. There are all kinds of awkward positions into which persons are pushed either by their own folly and vice or by the malignity of others. Such is the case of Malvolio when falling in love with his mistress Olivia through the intrigues of her maid ; and such, in the animal fable, are the misfortunes of the bear, the cat, and the wolf, who become the dupes of "Reynard the Fox." In Goldsmith's comedy *She Stoops to Conquer* Mrs. Hardcastle is by the tricks of her spoiled son Tony almost frightened to death in her own garden while she believes herself to be in Crack-skull Common, the most notorious spot in all the country. Sometimes people come

into a comical situation by ill-luck, and we laugh at their predicament; but, of course, we must always feel sure of a happy exit; the conflict must never grow tragical.

An inexhaustible source of hilarity is naïveté. There are daily new adventures that happen to both small and adult children. Such innocence at home and abroad may be found everywhere. Mark Twain is the classical author in this line of fun. Other remarkable productions of this type are in French *Tartarin* and in German *Die Familie Buchholz*.

There are persons who assume the mask of naïveté in order to make others laugh. If they wish to be sure of success, they must never laugh themselves but must play their part as long as they intend to keep their hearers in good humor. As soon as they laugh themselves, the spell is broken. The following story may serve as an instance of this kind of fun in which naïveté is assumed, but not genuine. Around large cities in Europe the hunting is annually leased by auction to the highest bidder. Thus it is usually in the hands of rich philistines, people who are sometimes very bad hunters. One of them once said to his fellow-hunter: "We pay for hunting one thousand dollars and shoot scarcely fifty hares. So every hare which we shoot costs at least fifty dollars." "So much?" said his friend. "Then I am glad we don't shoot more."

Men like to be merry, and so they laugh and find ridiculous subjects everywhere. Sometimes the worse their own situation is, the more they enjoy a laugh to balance their sorrows. If they are knocked down in life by the buffets of fate or by some enemy, they may, if they have but the humor to do so, fancy their victor to be in some ridiculous position, and at the mere play of imagination they will momentarily cure their ailments as if they were in no trouble whatever. It is a matter of fact that during the first French Revolution people in the face of the Guillotine jested at their keepers, tyrants, and judges. And the great Cervantes wrote his Don Quixote when imprisoned in a sponging-house. We might almost think the greater the danger, the better the fun. Soldiers in war are usually full of jokes, and even the conquered party indulge in witticisms, thus enjoying the harmless laugh of at least an imaginary

triumph. The world affords enough material for ridicule, if we but detect it; and where there is none, we are able to create it from a mere nothing. The mere idea of a reversed world suffices to excite merry laughter.

As beauty draws more than oxen, so wit is a more effective weapon than the sword. When in 1794 the question of the emblems and devices of national coins was before the House of Representatives, Matthew Lyon, a congressman from the South, stoutly opposed the eagle as being a monarchical bird. The king of birds, he thought, being an emblem of royalty, could not be a suitable representation of a country whose institutions were founded in opposition to kings. In reply Judge Thatcher proposed to have a goose as coat of arms for the United States, for the goose, he said, is a most humble and republican bird, not a beast of prey but a useful creature and would in other respects also prove advantageous, in as much as the goslings would be convenient emblems for the dimes. The laughter which followed at Mr. Lyon's expense was more than he could bear. He construed this good-humored irony into an insult, and sent Judge Thatcher a written challenge. The bearer delivered it to Mr. Thatcher, who read it and, handing it back, observed that he would not accept it. "What?" said the visitor, "will you be branded as a coward?" "Yes, sir, if you please. I always was a coward, and Mr. Lyon knew it, or he never would have challenged me." The new joke could not be resisted even by the angry party, and occasioned much mirth in congressional circles. The former cordial intercourse between both gentlemen was soon restored, for Mr. Lyon wisely concluded there was no use trying to fight an adversary who fired nothing but jokes.<sup>1</sup>

A witty remark once saved the life of a clergyman in the French Revolution. When surrounded by a mob shouting "*à la lanterne!*" he calmly asked: "Do you think it will give you more light if you hang me to the lantern-post?" The mob laughed and let him go.

Witticisms need not necessarily hit a certain person; they may

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<sup>1</sup> *Illustrated History of the U. S. Mint.* Philadelphia.

be aimed at a class of people or even quite abstractly denounce folly in general. Ancient historians inform us that Pythagoras, when he had discovered the theorem which up to this day bears his name, offered the sacrifice of a hecatomb to the gods. Archæologists, to be sure, doubt whether hecatomb means every hundredth ox or literally a hundred oxen. The latter, certainly, would have meant a great slaughter among the cattle. "Since that day," Heine says, "all oxen are afraid lest a genius discover a new theory; and hence we may well understand their interest in thwarting all such attempts. Therefore, when you have new ideas, beware of oxen!" The joke on the hecatomb of Pythagoras is not original with Heine; for we find a similar remark in the lectures of Hegel who expresses the same idea more concisely about as follows (I quote from memory): "The days of Pythagoras were a great time, when the new ideas of a genius were celebrated with hecatombs for the best of mankind—at the cost of the oxen."<sup>1</sup> Since Heine attended Hegel's lectures, it is very probable that he is indebted for the idea to the philosopher of the Absolute.

Having characterised in outline the origin and meaning of the human laugh and having found that the explanations, current among our leading philosophers from Aristotle down to Mr. Spencer, have overshot the mark and sought the solution of the problem which lies quite near, at too great a distance, we find ourselves actually at the beginning only of our investigation. Having found that laughing is an abbreviated but reiterated shout of triumph, we may now go over the whole field and revise the various detail problems connected with our subject. We may, for instance, inquire what, if anything, corresponds in animal life to the human laugh. Although it is quite true that laughing is a human prerogative, we may find that there are some expressions of mirth noticeable in the life of some higher animals which can be interpreted as an incipient laugh.

There are many additional problems connected with our sub-

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<sup>1</sup> "Es war eine grosse Zeit [die des Pythagoras], als die neuen Gedanken des Genius mit Hekatomben gefeiert wurden zum Frommen der Menschheit,—auf Kosten der Menschheit."

ject. We may ask, Is it possible to introduce the ridiculous into the realm of music, that is to say: Could a composer make people laugh with purely musical means? This would exclude comical songs as well as musical travesties; for the fun of the former consists in the words and is only heightened by an appropriate melody, while the latter are distortions of a melody which is associated with certain sentiments or ideas. The humor of a musical travesty is the product of its associations and does not lie in the music itself.

Further, the methods of attaining a triumph are different. We must therefore expect to have different conditions of that which will induce us to laugh. We should have to trace the differences between the ridiculous and the foolish, the comical and the funny, the satirical and the sarcastic, the ludicrous and the jocular, the odd and the grotesque, the droll and the baroque, the outlandish and the burlesque, mockery and scoff, irony and humor. We abstain from entering into these questions, because a discussion of them would take much space and time, and would, after all, throw very little light on the theory of laughing in general. We will, in fine, mention only one problem which has a certain moral significance: "Can any one laugh at himself?" Jean Paul Richter thinks not; at least not while we are in a ludicrous situation. He says: "No one can laugh at himself, unless it be an hour afterwards," viz., when we have to some degree become some one else. Richter's theory would imply that we can never take a higher view of our own self; it would in fact exclude the possibility of what is called self-criticism and even self-control. It is true that there are many people who are unable to practise self-control and self-criticism. They are naturally unable to laugh at themselves. The ability of seeing the ridiculous side of oneself is a moral quality, it is a great thing in life, for the acquisition of which it would be worth while to pray daily the words of Burns:

"O wad some power the giftie gie us  
To see oursel's as ithers see us."

The people who are unable to laugh at themselves, can never stand being laughed at by others. And why? Because they cannot

rise above themselves ; they cannot judge of themselves as they would judge of others, impartially and justly. A man who quietly suffers himself to be the butt of a harmless joke and even joins the laughing party not only proves that he is good-natured, but also that he is free from vanity. Vain persons and egotists will never learn to stand a joke ; they are irritable because they are worshippers of self and will not allow their deity to be triumphed over. To them their own person with all its faults is as sacred as are matters of religion to a devotee. Goethe therefore regarded the ability of good-naturedly allowing oneself to be laughed at as a sign of belonging to the aristocracy of head and heart. He says :

"Wer sich nicht selbst zum Besten haben kann,  
Gehört mir wahrlich niemals zu den Besten."<sup>1</sup>

EDITOR.

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<sup>1</sup> The play on the word *Besten* cannot be translated. *Jemanden zum Besten haben* means "to make a joke at the expense of some one." *Sich selbst zum Besten haben* means "to suffer oneself to be laughed at by others." The comparative and superlative of "good" is, in the Teutonic languages, derived from a root *Bat* or *Bad*, from which the English *bad* and the German *Busse* (penalty) are derived. He who is "held to the best" is made to pay.